

Bridge Building Through Language Learning

Sarah Moss

Dordt University, sarah.moss@dordt.edu

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BRIDGE BUILDING THROUGH LANGUAGE LEARNING



This spring, Dr. Rikki Brons taught courses in elementary Spanish, intermediate Spanish, conversational Spanish, and Spanish grammar.

Anyone who takes Spanish classes at Dordt University gets to know Associate Professor of Language Studies Dr. Rikki (Mueller, '04) Brons well.

She teaches nearly all of the Spanish courses at Dordt, and that is a benefit for most students.

"When I talk with students who are considering studying Spanish, I tell them that, yes, you will be stuck with me since I teach most classes," she laughs, "but I'll also be able to challenge you to improve your Spanish skills, recognize what areas you're passionate about, and support you in your growth."

Brons has an interactive, dynamic style when it comes to teaching Spanish. Her small classes and the amount of time she spends with each student over four years means she knows where each students' interests lie. She gives Spanish students the support and knowledge they need to go out and serve once they graduate.

Brons will do whatever it takes to help her hardworking students succeed. Every semester, she teaches independent study courses to ensure that her students learn

Spanish well and graduate on time. She collaborates with local organizations to help her students get good internships, placements, and student teaching opportunities.

Brons loves languages and is proficient in three of them: German (her native tongue), English, and Spanish. She says that with every language she has learned, she has developed a new perspective and a greater sense of compassion.

"I get most excited about what we're promised in the end—that every nation, every tongue, every tribe will stand before the throne and the Lamb. If I only know one language, I have so much more to learn about God and his creation. We're also called to love our neighbor, and if I can't communicate with my neighbor, then I'll have a more difficult time of doing that," she says.

Brons sees language learning as a bridge builder. It can help foster relationships, create empathy and a better understanding of other perspectives, and more. She sees these things happening in the lives of her students, who are using their language skills to make connections in Sioux County and beyond.

"When you learn a new language, you aren't just learning new words. You're learning someone else's perspective. You're learning about different traditions and cultures. You're getting to know them as an example of their culture and also as a unique person that God created. Students will come to me and say, 'I want to learn Spanish so I can be a better social worker,' but that's just the beginning, because with language learning comes friendship, perspective, and growth."

The following stories highlight five seniors who studied Spanish during their four years at Dordt and found that, along the way, they gained new perspectives on the importance of language learning. Their experiences were varied and include student teaching in an immersion program, working at a Mexican taco shop to improve conversational Spanish skills, and communicating with former inmates living in a halfway home. The five students not only developed their Spanish skills but learned how valuable it can be to be proficient in another language.

ANNA WALHOF

Nursing can be a tough major; it requires many hours of studying, memorizing, and testing. But Anna Walhof decided to take it up a notch: she chose to double major in Spanish as well.

"I decided I wanted to double major in nursing and Spanish because I enjoyed

JAMIN VER VELDE (99)



"If we as nurses want to care for each patient with compassion, we need to be open to learning to speak and understand another language," says Anna Walhof.

learning a new language," says Walhof. "I also worked as a CNA in a local hospital, and I realized that there was such a need

plenty of college credits while in high school. Instead, she studied abroad in Spain to complete her study abroad

course requirement as part of the Spanish major. When she found out she couldn't attend Spanish class every day because of her nursing schedule, she worked with Brons to formulate a plan to meet with Spanish tutors at night or during her free time.

"I really appreciate how flexible Professor Brons was with my schedule," says Walhof. "She was

always willing to move things around for me so that I could make it work with my nursing classes. She adapted her curriculum to fit my schedule and helped make it possible for me to learn."

This spring, Walhof enrolled in a class in medical Spanish, with the goal of making it easier to communicate with her hospital patients.

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— Dr. Rikki Brons, professor of language studies

for nurses who spoke Spanish. It was tough trying to communicate with our Spanish speaking patients, and I decided that if I had the opportunity to learn Spanish, I would take it."

During her sophomore and junior years of college, Walhof overloaded on college credits to fit in Spanish classes in. She originally planned to graduate a semester early, since she had earned

"Not long ago, I had a patient who was primarily Spanish speaking. My nursing and Spanish education allowed me to explain situations to him and to talk with him about how he was feeling about being in the hospital. Dordt has given me an excellent education and equipped me to be confident in my skills as a nurse and as a Spanish speaker so that I can provide the best care for my patients."

Walhof has worked at the Orange City Area Health System for the past year and will begin working there in a full-time capacity this summer. She currently works on the medical-surgical floor, but she hopes to be cross-trained to work in the emergency room.

"I want my patients to feel comfortable with me and the hospital, and if I can communicate with them in their native language to make them more comfortable, then that is what I will do."

SHANNON OOSTENINK

For years, Shannon Oostenink has dreamed of teaching in a Spanish immersion classroom—to teach curriculum entirely in Spanish so that

students learn to read, write, and speak Spanish throughout their daily lessons.

"Students who spend all day using Spanish in every interaction develop a vocabulary that is broad and useable,"

Especially as Christians, we have a responsibility to go out and be disciples to other nations, but we can do that in our own country. There are connections between language, culture, relationships, and our Christian calling to be disciples to one another.

— Shannon Oostenink, student

she explains. "Being able to start at a young age can be important to help them build their speaking skills so that, by the time they are in high school, they can speak with a high proficiency."

Oostenink spent hours researching immersion programs as part of her double major in Spanish and education.

She also wrote papers and gave presentations on the subject for the Kuyper Honors Program. While studying abroad in Spain for a semester, she experienced firsthand how valuable it is to have to speak a second language.

"My Spain experience was so formational in my Spanish-speaking ability, as I was constantly immersed in the language. I had no other option but to speak Spanish, and through that I was pushed outside my comfort zone and had to use language skills that I didn't think I had," she says. "Students in a Spanish immersion program get to do this every day."

Although she was disappointed when her student teaching experience in Nicaragua fell through due to Covid-19, Oostenink was thrilled to

learn that she could fulfill part of her student teaching requirement at Sonia Sotomayor Elementary School in Sioux Falls, a Spanish immersion program that currently enrolls 560 kindergarten through fifth grade students.

For the first half of the spring semester, Oostenink taught second graders entirely in Spanish. The 25 students in her class were all native English speakers.

"Every day, we started out with math, reading, grammar, and science—all in Spanish," she says. "It's like a normal school day at any other school; it's just taking place in Spanish."

Over the two months of student teaching, Oostenink watched her students grow by leaps and bounds in their Spanish speaking ability. And as she did so, she says she was reminded of why it is so valuable for Christians to be open to learning other languages.

"In my early Spanish classes at Dordt, we read a book called *The Gift of a Stranger*, which talks about how learning a language is one of the most Christianly acts you can do, because you're being a good neighbor to those around you," says Oostenink. "Especially as Christians, we have a responsibility to go out and be disciples to other nations, but we can do that in our own country. There are connections between language, culture, relationships, and our Christian calling to



SARAH MOSS (10)

As part of her independent study, Hailey Pullman presented on the intersection of flavor and health within food and culture in Sioux County's Hispanic population.



JAMIN VER VELDE (99)

Hailey Pullman spent time working at La Rancharita Taco Shop in Sioux Center, where Consuelo Sustaita taught her how to make authentic Mexican dishes.

be disciples to one another."

Oostenink's great experience at Sonia Sotomayor Elementary School led her to accept a full-time position teaching there this fall, and she is excited.

"Language and culture are some of the most beautiful things in life," she says. "They can help you broaden your views so that you can see others around you, how they live, what influences them, and more. Understanding another language opens up so many opportunities and relationships."

HAILEY PULLMAN

Biology Major Hailey Pullman was required to complete 90 hours of experiential learning for her Spanish minor. Originally, she had planned to study abroad, but after nearly two years of delays due to Covid-19, she and Brons came up with a different plan to combine her love for science and Spanish.

The result was "Cultura y Comida: La

Interseccion de la Salud y el Sabor," a semester-long research project looking at the intersection of flavor and health within food and culture in Sioux County's Hispanic population.

"I enjoy cooking, and I like to try different cultural foods," says Pullman. "So, I combined that with my interest in nutrition and investigated the local

“The relationships I developed through my independent study go well beyond the project.

— Hailey Pullman, student

cultures within our community. It was like having a cultural immersion program without having to go across the ocean."

Pullman spent many hours at La Rancharita Taco Shop, a Mexican restaurant in Sioux Center, where she worked directly with shop owner Consuelo Sustaita. During the lunch hour, Pullman took down customer orders, brought the tickets to the cooks,

and then brought the food to the counter. During quieter times, Pullman would learn about Mexican culture and traditions from Sustaita and her staff; she also spent time sampling different foods like gorditas and bistec a la Mexicana.

Her favorite day was masa day.

"Masa is corn flour. We'd dump the masa into a big bowl, add water, and mix it until it had a play dough consistency," says Pullman. "Consuelo told me that it's tradition in Mexico to put a cross in your dough as a symbol of God's blessing on what you're preparing. She let me put the cross in the dough, and I felt pretty special being able to participate in that tradition. Then we'd take a ball of the masa, put it at the center of a tortilla press, and apply pressure."

Pullman also spent time building relationships with community members.

"I met Norma at my church in Sioux Center, and she was awesome," says Pullman. "We'd have phone conversations in Spanish, and we also had a cooking day where we made pozole, a type of soup that includes hominy, meat, and cabbage."

Pullman came to know Azucena and her family, who live in Hawarden. Pullman went to Azucena's house, where she spoke with them in Spanish and taught them some phrases in English.

"They invited me to their daughter's birthday party," says Pullman. "The party started at 5 p.m., so I showed up at 5 p.m., only to discover that guests actually start showing up at 7 p.m. So that was an interesting cultural note."

At the party, she tried la birria, another type of soup, and ensalada de nopales, a cactus salad—both of which were delicious.

"The relationships I developed through my independent study go well beyond the project," says Pullman. "Yes, I had to meet those 90 experiential hours, but I have made strong connections and good friends along the way."

A third part of her project was working with Promise Community Health Center in Sioux Center. Pullman spent several afternoons at Promise with two health coaches to assist Spanish-speaking clientele in making lifestyle changes that would allow them to live healthier

lives. Clients were dealing with such things as diabetes or hyperlipidemia, an abnormally high concentration of fats or lipids in the blood.

"Particularly for hyperlipidemia, the health coaches often hear from clients that they cook and fry their foods with Mazola oil because they think it's heart healthy. In reality, Mazola oil has an improper ratio of Omega 6s to Omega 3s; normally, you want a 3:1 ratio, but this oil has 46:1 ratio. So even though the label says it is heart healthy, that packaging can be deceiving."

Pullman and the health coaches also helped to educate clients on managing carbohydrates; one patient they met with said his daily diet consisted of eight tortillas plus bean and rice.

"The diet is predominantly carbohydrates, which can throw blood sugar out of whack," says Pullman. "Carbohydrates are not bad, but it's important to create a balance and to incorporate more vegetables into the diet when possible."

Pullman is thrilled with the varied experiences she had within the Sioux Center community.

"God opened doors and offered me opportunities before I even knew I needed it," she says. "I didn't have to go across the ocean to interact with people around me and to learn a language better. I feel blessed that I got to experience other cultures just by exploring my own community."

DESTINY HOWERZYL

"I've always had a heart for helping people," says Destiny (De Hoogh) Howerzyl. "But my experience in the foster care system and being adopted was really what made me want to major in social work. I've always believed God uses our stories to impact other people, and I know God can use my story and experiences to help others through my career in social work."

Howerzyl grew up speaking Spanish at home, but when she was adopted at age 13, her adopted family didn't speak Spanish, and she lost some of her

"Having people from different backgrounds and cultures brings a richness to the community and to the church, and I think that's awesome," says Destiny Howerzyl.

Spanish speaking abilities. When she decided to attend Dordt, she knew she wanted to enroll in Spanish classes so she could relearn some of what she had lost.

an internship. She worked with Dismas Charities in Sioux City, Iowa, which serves as a halfway house for individuals coming out of federal prison.

"The halfway house is a transition point for residents. They have left prison, but they haven't quite reentered the community," explains Howerzyl.

Dismas Charities' goal is to give "men and women released from state and federal incarceration the skills and motivation to re-enter society as contributing members" and "to end the cycle of victimization and to heal the human spirit." The organization provides residents with plenty of resources as they work toward community reentry. Residents have access to counseling support, help with job and housing search, and education options.

Howerzyl worked one on one with residents to conduct psycho-social

assessments in which she got to know the resident—their interests, their goals, their worries. She also led some group classes where she taught lessons to groups of residents.

She found plenty of opportunities to use her Spanish speaking skills, too.

"Currently, Dismas does not

Initially I wasn't planning to major in Spanish, but I loved the Spanish classes at Dordt and was thrilled to be able to hold more conversations in Spanish.

— Destiny Howerzyl, student

"Initially I wasn't planning to major in Spanish, but I loved the Spanish classes at Dordt and was thrilled to be able to hold conversations in Spanish," she says. "Also, Professor Brons is a really awesome professor. She makes Spanish classes fun. With every class I took, I knew I was going to learn something new, whether it was new vocabulary or new cultural ideas."

As part of her social work major, Howerzyl needed to participate in



have a translator for residents, and there are a many Spanish speaking residents who are at the facility right now," says Howerzyl. "So I was able to spend a lot of time translating for residents."

She shared lessons in English and in Spanish, and she worked individually with Spanish speakers to make sure they understood content.

Although she learned much from her internship at Dismas, Howerzyl is more interested in working with teens and families in the future. This fall, she plans to enroll in the Master of Social Work program at Dordt to continue learning.

"I really enjoyed my time at Dordt; I've learned so much in the past few years," she says. "My social work and Spanish professors have been really awesome and have influenced me. I'm excited to go into the social work field once I've completed my master's degree. I'll use Spanish in my work as a social worker, but I'll also use it in other areas of my life too. I'm excited to see what God has in store for me."

ONICA NOP

Like many college students, Onica Nop switched her major a few times. She started off as an actuarial science major because she liked math; then she switched to a double major in marketing and Spanish because she wanted to interact with people. When she realized business wasn't a great fit for her, she switched from marketing to an education major with a middle

JAMIN VER VELDE (99)



"The study abroad aspect of Dordt's Spanish program is really important," says Onica Nop. "I think studying abroad will help improve my Spanish speaking skills."

school math and science endorsement. This combined her interest in interacting with people as well as her love of math. Through it all, she stuck with her Spanish major, and she picked up an ESL endorsement.

Nop is thrilled to be studying abroad this summer in Spain. While there, she is living with a Spanish-speaking host family, participating in university classes taught only in Spanish, and learning to interact with native Spanish speakers.

"Being able to study abroad while at Dordt is something I'm very grateful for," she says.

This spring, Nop completed a student teaching experience at Sioux Center Middle School. She taught seventh grade math for the first nine weeks and then taught English as a Second Language (ESL) and a fifth grade Spanish course. She found the two student teaching experiences to be vastly different. When teaching math, she taught at the front of the classroom; as an ESL teacher, she served in more of a supporting role and worked individually with students to help guide them through a lesson plan. For example, she and her mentor teacher might go into a social studies class, help adjust the lesson plan to an ESL student's

JAMIN VER VELDE (99)



Students studying Spanish can receive tutoring at the Academic Enrichment Center to help improve their Spanish speaking and writing skills.

CONVERSATION PRACTICE

One thing Nop appreciated about Dordt's Spanish program is the opportunity it gave her to cultivate her conversational Spanish skills. In conversation classes, Nop and her fellow students discussed specific topics, practiced speaking sentences out loud, and played games.

"You can learn Spanish but speaking it out loud can be a bit scary. You worry about how you're going to sound and if your pronunciation is any good. But I think that pushed me to improve my speaking skills," she says.

She also participated in live labs, where Brons invites native Spanish speakers to converse with students for an hour each week.

"They can help you with homework, or you can just have a conversation for an hour," says Nop. "These are great opportunities to speak the language instead of just looking at a textbook."

needs, and then guide them through it.

She also taught one Spanish class each day. The goal of the class was simply to explore Spanish and not grade proficiency. The rambunctious fifth graders didn't always take the subject matter seriously, says Nop, but she still had a good learning experience working with her mentor teacher, Fabiola (Castelan, '14) Addink.

"Faby is very kind and dedicated to her students," says Nop. "She was easy to work with, very flexible, and encouraging. I learned so much from her and really enjoyed working with a Dordt graduate."

"Onica came in ready to help and support students from day one," says Addink. "When it comes to working with newcomers—students new to the United States—there isn't a lot of time to adjust; you have to just jump in. She quickly built a rapport with my students. I felt like I had a second certified ESL teacher with me, even if she was still technically a student teacher."

In the fall, Nop will teach sixth, seventh, and eighth graders in Spanish, math, and science—all three of her favorite subjects—at Hanford Christian School in Hanford, California. She plans to pack up her belongings from her home state of Vermont and move across the country sometime in July. Nop is grateful to have had experience in an exploratory classroom at Sioux Center Middle School, as it serves as a great base for her to begin teaching Spanish at Hanford Christian.

"It's been good practice for me to teach Spanish because it's so different from teaching math," she says. "I've learned about different resources I can use and different ways of presenting the material. I also know what types of assessments I want to put in place."

Nop is thankful to have been part of Dordt's Spanish program.

"Since the classes are pretty small, you get more opportunities to interact with your classmates and with the professor," she says. "I know Professor Brons very well. I babysat her kids, and when I was stressed about choosing a job, I called her for advice. I knew that, if I needed extra support, I could just ask her. I think having those types of relationships is really important."

SARAH MOSS ('10)

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— Fabiola (Castelan, '14) Addink speaking about Onica Nop



JAMIN VER VELDE ('99)

Onica Nop, who will teach at Hanford Christian School in California this fall, is planning to reshape the middle school Spanish program and has already picked out new curriculum.